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AUTHOR Jose, Paul E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to discover why young children fail to respond to fables in the same way as older children and adults. The paper describes a model of fable comprehension and appreciation which posits that the moral lesson of a fable is specified by the nature of the outcome that results from the actions of the main character. Although children in late grade school have been found to prefer stories that involve "just-world" resolutions to stories that do not, those in early grade school exhibit no such preference. In a just world, good behavior is rewarded by positive outcomes and morally bad behavior is punished with negative outcomes. The hypothesis of this study was that young children would have difficulty understanding and appreciating fables because they lacked a stable belief in a just world. Each of 171 kindergarten-through-eighth-grade students and 54 college students were questioned about four stories: 1) an Aesop fable, 2) an Aesop fable with reversed outcome, 3) a narrative with good or bad human characters who received either positve or negative outcome, and 4) a similar narrative to story 3 but with animal characters. In stories 3 and 4, outcomes which conformed to just-world resolution were preferred and judged to be more fair by subjects of all ages. Marginally significant results suggest that kindergarten children have not yet integrated the just-world belief into their "story schema." Kindergarteners liked the outcomes of "reversed" fables as much as those of "true" fables, and it was not until late grade school that the outcomes of true fables were reliably liked more. (BN)

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Development of the Appreciation of Fables

Paul E. Jose

Loyola University of Chicago

Marcy Dorfman

University of New Hampshire

Lisa Sliwa

Loyola University of Chicago

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Development of the Appreciation of Fables

The present study was designed to discover why young children fail to respond to fables like older children and adults. Pillar (1980) has reported that 2nd and 4th grade children experience difficulty in comprehending fables as moral lessons. Fischer (1979) has also noted that morals provided by children of higher mental age are more accurate. These studies notwithstanding, little empirical work has been done on the development of the comprehension and appreciation of fables, although research on children's acquisition of the ability to understand figurative language is pertinent (Billow, 1975; Winner, Rosentiel, & Gardner, 1976).

Generally, young children (kindergarten through early grade school) appear not to understand that characters and actions described within a fable are abstractions symbolizing wisdom and folly, and good and evil. Thus, their responses tend to be specific to the situation described in the fable and not generalizable to humans and the wider world; for example, if asked to state the moral of the "Tortoise and the hare" fable, young children say that the rabbit shouldn't have fallen asleep. They fail to understand that the action of the rabbit symbolizes sloth, and that the moral lesson of the story pertains not to rabbits and turtles but to human beings.

One possible reason why empirical work with fables has not been pursued is that no clear account of how and why readers abstract moral lessons from fables has been formulated. The present paper relates a model of fable comprehension and appreciation developed by Dorfman (1986). The model building process was begun by reading the corpus of Aesop fables in a search for identifiable commonalities between the more than one hundred fables attributed to

this Greek ex-slave. Two key dynamics became obvious: 1) most fables involve unpleasant outcomes for one or more of the characters, and 2) these outcomes seemed to be causally linked with previous actions or attributes of the characters.

Therefore, the central tenet of the model became that the moral lesson that a fable wishes to teach, i.e., the moral, is specified by the nature of the outcome that occurs to the main character: if the outcome is positive, then the quality exemplified by the character is considered to be desirable, and if the outcome is negative, then the quality exemplified by the character is considered to be undesirable. For example, the tortoise in the "Tortoise and the hare" fable experienced a positive outcome. Reasoning backwards to previous actions performed by the tortoise, the reader concludes that perseverance is a good trait because it is rewarded in this narrative. Similarly, the reader concludes that overconfidence exemplified by the hare is an undesirable trait because it is seen as causing the hare to lose the race.

This contingency of moral action and outcome is similar to Lerner's (1980) description of the belief in a just world. Lerner has claimed that people in our society are motivated to believe that morally good behavior will be rewarded with positive outcomes and that morally bad behavior will be punished with negative outcomes. If events in the real world conform to these two stipulations, then a person feels satisfaction and contentment. However, if events fail to conform to these expectations, then a person will feel disappointment, anger, frustration or some other negative emotion. For example, if one works very hard on a project and then doesn't receive proper credit for the work, then that person is likely to judge that the outcome

wasn't fair and will feel angry.

Readers of stories seem to expect that events in make-believe narratives will also conform to the just world belief. Jose & Brewer (1984) have shown that children in late grade school like stories that involve just world resolution better than stories that do not. They prefer stories in which a good character receives a positive outcome and stories in which a bad character receives a negative outcome. They dislike stories in which a good character receives a negative outcome and stories in which a bad character receives a positive outcome. However, this work showed that the youngest group, 2nd graders, did not reliably prefer just world resolution. They did not combine information about the nature of the character (good or bad) with information about the outcome (positive or negative); their judgments focused only on the outcome information. The present research was designed to investigate whether early grade school children would demonstrate the same result with shorter stories, i.e., fables.

Piaget's (1948) description of the immanent justice belief is pertinent to a discussion of fable comprehension also. Piaget based his observations about immanent justice on data from six- to twelve-year old children's responses to fable-like stories. One story concerned a little boy who stole apples in an orchard. After escaping from a policeman, he began to walk home, but while crossing an old bridge, he fell through it and into the water. Piaget asked these children why the boy fell into the river. If they responded that it was because he stole the apples, then Piaget attributed an immanent justice response to them. He claimed that young children's poor understanding of causality led them to believe that "automatic punishments . .

emanate from things themselves" (p. 251). These observations are relevant in this context because they further confirm that grade school children believe in the moral appropriateness of just world resolution, i.e., that a bad character should be punished with a negative outcome. However, it is not clear from Piaget's data whether early grade school children (i.e., kindergarten and 1st grade) would use just world resolution in understanding and appreciating fables.

Earlier data (Dorfman, 1986) has shown that adults rate the fables as predicted by the proposed model of fable structure. Fables that involve clear just world resolution are liked more and are perceived as having a moral. However, young children may have not acquired the same "fable schema". The chief hypothesis of the present study was that young children would experience some difficulty understanding and appreciating fables because they have not yet acquired a stable belief in a just world.

Method

Four types of narratives were used: 1) actual Aesop fables, 2) Aesop fables with reversed outcomes, 3) narratives with good or bad human characters who received either positive or negative outcomes, and 4) similar narratives as in #3 except with animal characters. Subjects were 39 kindergartners, 37 1st-2nd graders, 47 3rd-4th graders, 48 5th-8th graders and 54 college students. Each child received four stories: one true fable, one reversed fable, one human character story, and one animal character story. The stories were read to the kindergarten through 2nd grade subjects to minimize memory differences. Also, these subjects repeated the story (to criterion) before questions were asked in order to equalize memory for crucial story elements. Sub-

jects indicated whether the story had a moral, what it was, and whether they agreed with it. They also rated how fair the outcome of the story was and how much they liked the main character, the outcome, and the whole story.

Results

Results for the non-fable stories will be related first. Then the results for the Aesop and reversed fables will be described. The dependent measures of liking, fairness, and judgments of the moral were subjected to three-way analyses of variance (Grade of subject X Character valence X Outcome valence).

Just world resolution stories. Subjects of all ages liked good characters and disliked bad characters, $F(1, 390) = 206.6$, $p < .00001$. More interestingly, the prediction that just world resolution would be appreciated was borne out. This result was found for judged outcome fairness, outcome liking and story liking. The outcome of the story was judged to be more fair, $F(1, 390) = 191.9$, $p < .00001$, was liked more, $F(1, 390) = 103.6$, $p < .00001$, and contributed to overall story liking more, $F(1, 390) = 74.47$, $p < .00001$, if it conformed to just world resolution. The means for story liking (see Table 1) are representative of all three findings.

Insert Table 1 about here

A marginally significant interaction between Grade of subject, Character valence and Outcome valence for liking of outcome, $F(4, 390) = 2.46$, $p = .11$, suggests that kindergarten children, and some 1st graders, have not yet integrated the just world belief into their story schema (see Table 2). The

younger children based their judgment of outcome liking upon outcome valence and disregarded whether the character was good or bad. Thus, the two stories with positive outcomes (good/positive and bad/positive) were liked more than the two negative outcome stories (good/negative and bad/negative). Older children, beginning about 1st or 2nd grade and solidifying about 3rd or 4th grade, integrated these two sources of information and gave the just world resolution result.

Insert Table 2 about here

Fables. As predicted, the kindergarten subjects responded to the fables differently than older subjects. Table 3 shows that kindergartners liked the outcomes of reversed fables as much as those of the true fables, and it is not until late grade school (5th-8th grades) that the outcomes of true fables are reliably liked more. The results for story liking are similar except that none of the grade school groups reliably preferred the true Aesop fables to the reversed fables; only the adult group showed this result.

Insert Table 3 about here

The judgment whether the story contained a moral or not showed a developmental trend. Table 4 shows that children from kindergartner through 2nd grade thought that reversed fables contained a moral as often as true fables. Older children and adults concluded that the true fables were more likely to contain a moral.

Insert Table 4 about here

A preliminary inspection of the morals supplied by the children for true Aesop fables indicate that most of them conform to the traditional meaning of the fables. Younger children seem to have supplied more concrete morals (i.e., specific to the narrative) than older children and adults. Interestingly, many children and some adults provide morals for reversed fables and non-just world stories that may be termed "ironic" (Dorfman, 1986). Further investigation of these subject-generated morals will tell us more about whether the proposed fable model is adequate for describing the general process of fable comprehension and appreciation.

Conclusions

Young children were found to differ from older children in terms of their ability to integrate several sources of information within narratives and to find a moral lesson that generalizes to everyday life. In particular, kindergartners and some 1st and 2nd graders focused upon outcome valence, i.e., whether it is a positive or negative outcome, to determine whether they liked the outcome and the story/fable. This result agrees with data reported by Jose and Brewer (1984) that indicated that 2nd graders fail to perform the same judgment in longer stories. We conclude that early grade school children's fable schema is inchoate.

However, Pillar's (1980) strong conclusion that fables are inappropriate for teaching moral lessons to early grade school children is perhaps overstated. Young children may not yet fully comprehend the moral implications of

a fable, but it may be a good method for beginning to teach them general moral desiderata. If teachers draw an explicit parallel between animal character's actions in a fable and humans' actions in the real world, then children will begin to understand the symbolic nature of fables. Children who are at the cusp of concrete operations will benefit from being pushed into understanding figurative language, such as fables. Preschoolers who do not possess the early glimmerings of concrete operational thought will not benefit as much. Also, we suspect that preschoolers who are exposed to narratives that embody just world resolution will probably acquire the mature fable schema more quickly.

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Table 1

Rated Story Liking as a Function of Character Valence and Outcome Valence

	Outcome valence	
Character valence	Positive	Negative
Good	5.88	3.80
Bad	4.10	4.91

Table 2

Rated Liking of Story Outcome as a Function of Age of Subject, Character Valence and Outcome Valence

Character valence	Outcome valence: Positive	Outcome valence: Negative
	Kindergarten	
Good	6.18	2.33
Bad	4.12	2.41
	1st/2nd	
Good	6.41	2.50
Bad	5.16	4.35
	3rd/4th	
Good	6.18	3.36
Bad	4.00	5.63
	5th/8th	
Good	6.46	3.25
Bad	3.78	4.17
	Adults	
Good	5.90	2.08
Bad	3.32	4.14

Table 3

Fable Stories: Liking of Outcomes as a Function of Grade of Subject

	Fable type	
Grade of subject	True fables	Reversed fables
Kindergarten	4.31	4.26
1st-2nd	4.67	3.50
3rd-4th	4.74	3.58
5th-8th	5.77	3.63 *
Adults	4.80	2.56 **

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$